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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 002009

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TAGS: PROP PREL PGOV KOLY KS AS CH  
SUBJECT: PRC OFFICIALS URGED TO FIND A BETTER  
TIBET/OLYMPICS MEDIA STRATEGY

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson.  
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Chinese and foreign communications experts criticized the Chinese Government's handling of the negative publicity surrounding the Olympic torch relay at an off-the-record academic seminar attended by MFA and State Council Information Office officials (and PolOff) May 10. Participants cited the 1988 Seoul Games as a positive example for China, because South Korea at the time was a target of international human rights criticism yet still managed to host a successful Games that bolstered the regime's legitimacy. Two public relations experts said the Chinese Government remains too slow in responding to negative media stories and its desire to control the message prevents it from enlisting help from sympathetic groups overseas. Foreign guests at the conference urged China to fulfill its Olympics bid commitments by allowing foreign reporters unfettered access to all regions, including Tibet. State Council Information Office Press Department Director Guo Weimin said China wants to improve its transparency, but he lamented that "anti-China prejudice" among many Western journalists is too great to overcome.  
Comment: Guo's sentiments are typical of the Chinese academics and officials who participated. While acknowledging that relaxing controls on the foreign media could help boost China's image in the run-up to the Olympics, they worried that giving journalists freer reign would result in even more negative reporting. (Note: This seminar occurred two days before the devastating May 12 Wenchuan earthquake that was followed by unprecedented -- albeit not unfettered -- openness to foreign and domestic media coverage.)  
End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (C) Chinese and foreign participants at a May 10 seminar on "The Olympics, International Communications and Non-Traditional Security" urged China to adopt a more sophisticated and proactive strategy to counter negative publicity surrounding the Chinese response to unrest in Tibet and the Olympic torch relay. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Center for Regional Security Studies and Tsinghua University's International Center for Communication Studies co-sponsored the seminar. In addition to discussion of public relations strategies China should consider, speakers also explored how the lessons of the 2000 Sydney Olympics and the 1988 Seoul Olympics could

apply to Beijing.

Torch Demonstrations are a "Non-Traditional Threat"

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¶3. (C) In one panel discussion, Wang Yizhou, Vice Director of CASS's Institute of World Economics and Politics, stated that anti-China demonstrations surrounding the torch relay are an example of a non-traditional security threat, involving non-state actors, driven by societal factors and not controllable by the military. While a small number of torch relay demonstrators were conspirators seeking to embarrass China and disrupt the Olympic Games, Wang said, many were "good people" with misguided views on Tibet. Changing the views of the "children and housewives" who participated in the London and Paris demonstrations represents an important challenge for China, he argued. The Western media's "sensationalism" of the torch protests added to the demonstrators' effectiveness. This "media bias" has proven very difficult to counter, because China "does not handle the international media well." (As an aside, Wang urged an honest assessment within China about the Tibet unrest. It is not true that only a small number of Tibetans engaged in violence; the unrest was widespread, he said. China should reflect on its Tibet policy and the problems that exist in ethnic relations.)

Lessons from Sydney 2000 and Seoul 1988

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¶4. (C) A second panel explored lessons China could draw from the Sydney 2000 and Seoul 1988 Olympics.

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Panelists noted that aborigine rights groups had threatened to demonstrate at the Sydney Games. Ian McCartney, a security officer at the Australian Embassy who was involved in preparations for the 2000 Olympics, stressed that the Olympics must be run as "a sporting event, not a security event," because too much security makes it impossible for people to enjoy the Games. Australia, McCartney acknowledged, has the twin advantages of geographic isolation and internal political stability. Nevertheless, prior to the 2000 Olympics opening ceremony, Australia engaged in a comprehensive intelligence program to identify potential threats. Also, to prevent major disruptions, Australia's parliament passed legislation giving police more power to disperse demonstrators.

¶5. (C) Dong Xiangrong, a scholar at the CASS Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, noted parallels between the 2008 Beijing Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The Seoul Games were also conducted in a difficult international political climate. At the time, South Korea did not have diplomatic relations with socialist countries, and many predicted that the Soviet bloc would boycott. Dong said that while the Olympics did embolden South Korean student demonstrators who knew the Government could not use harsh methods against them for fear of endangering the Games, it is an oversimplification to say the event promoted political liberalization. South Korean Embassy First Secretary Suh Doo Hyun agreed, saying the 1988 Games succeeded despite widespread international criticism of South Korea's human rights record. The success of the Games boosted support for the regime and turned into a huge public relations boon, he said.

China "Losing PR Battle to the Dalai Lama"

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¶6. (C) Next, two communications experts gave blunt

assessments of the Chinese Government's public relations deficiencies. Serge Dumont, Asia Pacific president of the Omnicom Group, said China has already fallen into a public relations crisis, as the Olympics have become a focus for international criticism.

Dumont said China's decision to engage in talks with the Dalai Lama's representatives May 4 was a smart move, but China is still losing the public relations battle. When Westerners see the Dalai Lama, they see a "nice man who speaks of love and peace." The Dalai Lama also follows a key rule of public relations by staying positive and rarely criticizing others.

Furthermore, Dumont continued, the Chinese Government does not trust outsiders to make its case. Most of the time, the local Chinese ambassador is the only person explaining China's position to foreign audiences. However, Chinese officials do not understand that Westerners typically view governments as among the least credible sources of information. China should rely more on sympathetic foreign NGOs, such as business groups, to help convince foreign audiences. It needs to be a French person telling a French audience why it is important to maintain good relations with China, Dumont stressed.

¶7. (C) Wu Xu, Assistant Professor of Communications at Arizona State University, told the group the Chinese Government is still too slow to react to public relations crises. In addition, China has trouble distinguishing which media figures are truly influential. For example, the Chinese Government has spent a great deal of energy denouncing CNN commentator Jack Cafferty, yet Cafferty only gets five minutes of air time per week. Meanwhile, China largely ignores anti-China statements by Lou Dobbs, who has a daily show on CNN. China also tends to deny visas to unfriendly journalists, which Wu argued is counterproductive.

#### More Openness and Tolerance Needed

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¶8. (C) Donald Morrison, former editor-in-chief of the Asian edition of Time magazine and current visiting scholar at Tsinghua, urged China to put the recent negative press in perspective. China should realize that Western media are not engaged in a "plot" to "keep China down." Despite the recent public anger at foreign journalists, Morrison argued, most Beijing-

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based correspondents "really love China." However, they find their work extremely difficult, and in the wake of the Tibet unrest many have received death threats. Morrison argued that China should invite more Western editors and media executives to visit rather than focus its efforts on working-level journalists. PolOff, who was also invited to speak, made the point that China should fulfill its Olympic commitments by allowing unfettered access for foreign reporters to all areas, including Tibet, and should treat inevitable Olympic protestors with tolerance.

¶9. (C) Li Xiguang, Executive Dean of Tsinghua's School of Journalism and Communications, suggested that Beijing's Olympic organizers establish a designated protest area close to the Olympic village. Tsinghua University Journalism Professor Zhou Qing'an noted that in past controversies surrounding the Olympics, negative publicity generally peaked three to six months before the opening ceremony. Zhou said that one positive outcome of the uproar over Tibet and the torch relay is that China is developing a thicker skin, as its tolerance for negative news reporting increases.

¶10. (C) Guo Weimin, director of the Press Department at the State Council Information Office, closed the conference by saying that China is moving toward greater openness but still "needs time." Guo said he led a group of Western journalists to Lhasa in late March, but was chagrined to find that their subsequent reporting was just as "negative" as before the trip. The anti-China prejudice of some Western journalists, Guo theorized, may simply run too deep to change. Nevertheless, Guo said, China will continue to improve information flow and to become more open and transparent. "Western media is not our friend," Guo said, "but it is also not our enemy."

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